African Scholarship, Language and Democracy:
The Struggle for Participatory and Inclusionary Politics in Africa
Henry Dougan
Political Science

The nationalist struggle for independence from colonial domination was at its heart a struggle
for more inclusive, participatory and autonomous political decision-making by African
societies. Similarly, the struggle for pan-African unity can be seen as an effort to envision and
construct modes of political organization that would have sustained such inclusive and
participatory politics by African societies in the face of various external pressures.
Unfortunately some of those political elite who led the struggle for independence were
consequently to subvert democratic practice in their societies after post independence.

African scholarship has been part of the vanguard in the colonial as well as postcolonial era
struggles for more participatory and inclusive politics in African societies, a situation that has
often imposed severe costs on scholars. This struggle by African scholarship is seen in
critiques of the poverty of the political and economic leadership of the African political elite,
in the exploitative and authoritarian nature of many external political and economic
interventions on the continent, as well as in the stifling hold of foreign academic communities
on the production of knowledge on the continent. Seen from this perspective, African
scholarship has had reason to celebrate its role in the struggle for participatory and
autonomous politics on the continent.

I argue in this essay that the picture painted above of the role of African scholarship is only
one side of the coin. Through its linguistic practices African scholarship has either
consciously or unconsciously marginalised whole segments of African societies in the debate
of key questions that have shaped the life chances of African communities. By choosing to
carry on scholarship almost exclusively in languages like English and French in which only
minor segments of their societies are literate, African scholars have created and perpetuated a
situation in which vast segments of local populations have been excluded from significant
participation in the discourses that have shaped processes on the continent. While proclaiming
like Mkandawire that “Locals do know, and know a lot about their condition,” African
scholarship has willfully circumscribed the circumference of the knowing by inscribing
emersion in a Western tradition indicated specifically by literacy in a major Western language
as the precondition for belonging to the knowing. Thus African scholarship should be seen
more as an elite fighting to carve itself a space in a constrictive space of political discourse
and practice rather than a truly radical force seeking to crack wide open an exclusionary and
authoritarian space. We must seriously rethink our linguistic practices if we hope to become
the radical force striving for democratic politics on the continent that we often cast ourselves
as.